Is privacy a privilege of the righteous?

By Matt Gaventa
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Last week, news broke of the massive iCloud security breach that included nude photos of several celebrity actresses. In the wake of the leak, we have heard the usual chorus of victim blaming. *New York Times* tech editor Nick Bilton tweeted the essence of the argument (he later apologized):

> Put together a list of tips for celebs after latest leaks: 1. Don't take nude selfies 2. Don't take nude selfies 3. Don't take nude selfies
>
> — Nick Bilton (@nickbilton) September 1, 2014

It seems obvious enough: if you want to avoid seeing your own naked photos on the Internet, don't take naked photos. But—as has also been widely argued in the last week—this advice places the responsibility for privacy violations onto the victims rather than onto those who hacked into and violated their private files. Becoming a celebrity has not cost Jennifer Lawrence the reasonable expectation of her own privacy. Kate Upton has not sacrificed some fundamental aspect of her human dignity simply by being famously beautiful. The focus should be on the act of aggression and abuse epitomized by the hack itself.

The challenge is to take this argument to its logical extension, beyond the scope of celebrity photo leaks and into the realm of digital privacy and human rights. *The Intercept* recently broke a story on a "Google-like" NSA search engine called ICREACH, a system that mines "more than 850 billion records about phone calls, emails, cellphone locations, and internet chats." Obviously this revelation is just one more in an emerging portrait of the widespread surveillance available for security agencies in 2014.

As we consider how to weigh privacy concerns in the wake of ICREACH and its peers, we face questions not unlike those raised by celebrity photo leaks: is privacy the privilege of the righteous? If you don't want nude photos of yourself on the Internet,

should you just not take them in the first place? Should violations of privacy only be a concern for those who have something to hide? Or is the sin here rather in the infinitely seductive power of surveillance itself?

Christians have theological and biblical language to navigate these waters. Bathsheba bathes on the roof, in a place removed and hidden from the public gaze of anyone walking along the street. Only David—by virtue of his political authority, by virtue of the height of his vantage point—has the opportunity to look. A violation occurs, and so begins a story that leads to abuse, corruption, and, of course, murder.

But we don't blame Bathsheba for doing whatever she wants in the reasonable privacy of her own rooftop. The sin, of course, is in David's heart, and in the privilege afforded by his powerful station. If he were a street merchant, he would not have had the opportunity to violate Bathsheba's privacy in the first place. The sin is clearly not Bathsheba's. The sin is David's, for yielding to the opportunities afforded by the power of his office.

David's legacy is clear: violations of privacy are fundamentally related to abuses of power. The onus should not be on those surveilled to defend their actions but rather on those doing the surveillance. Violations of privacy have nothing to do, first and foremost, with the character of the abused; rather, they have everything to do with the seduction and availability of power, never more seductive or available than it is in the interconnected world of 2014.

Today, the tremendous amount of personal data stored online—combined with the infinitely contingent security of the Internet in the first place—affords all those with technological power the same opportunity that corrupted David's heart. We've spent far too long talking about the sin of having naked photos. We're overdue for interrogating the sins of the ones who look.